DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 648 CG 011 233

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TITLE Counselor Reactions To Female Clients: Type of Problem, Age of Client, and Sex of Counselor. Report No. 2-76.
INSTITUTION Maryland Univ., College Park. Counseling Center.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 26p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$2.06 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Clinical Diagnosis; *Counselor Attitudes; Emotional Problems; Empathy; *Females; *Rape; Research Projects; *Response Mode; Sex Differences

ABSTRACT

Videotaped vignettes of two 35-year old women and two 20-year old women who portrayed problems about the fear of rape, existential anxiety, choice of a college major in social work, or choice of a college major in engineering were shown to 88 male/female counselors. Results indicated that the two personal-social problems were rated as more serious than the vocational problems on all dependent measures. Additionally, the feared rape problem was considered the most serious and needing the most counseling sessions, whereas the women with existenial anxiety were perceived as being most able to profit from counseling, and were offered the most empathy. These findings suggest that counselors respond differentially to women with different characteristics. (Author)

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COUNSELOR REACTIONS TO FEMALE CLIENTS: TYPE OF PROBLEM, AGE OF CLIENT, AND SEX OF COUNSELOR

Clara E. Hill, Mary Faith Tanney, Mary Margaret Leonard and Joanne Reiss

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SUMMARY

Eighty-eight male and female counselors received videotaped vignettes of two 35-year old women and two 20-year old women who portrayed problems about the fear of rape, existential anxiety, choice of a college major in social work, or choice of a college major in engineering. Results indicated that the two personal-social problems were rated as more serious than the vocational problems on all dependent measures. Additionally, the feared rape problem was considered the most serious and needing the most counseling sessions, whereas the women with existenial anxiety were perceived as being most able to profit from counseling, and also they received the most empathy. The two vocational problems did not differ on any of the variables. Further results indicated effects for both client age and counselor sex, depending on the particular problem. These findings suggest that counselors respond differentially to women with different characteristics.

Counselor reactions to female clients: Type of problem, age of client, and sex of counselor

Sex-role bias and prejudicial treatment of male and female clients by counselors is of increasing concern to both practitioners and researchers (American Psychological Association, 1975). Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz and Vogel (1970) found that counselors have different standards of mental health for males and females. Recent research has confirmed that male and female counselors also respond differently with male and female clients (Hill, 1975), although a recent comprehensive review of the literature in this area (Tanney and Birk, in press) has documented the complexity of the data on counselor-client gender pairings.

The examination of the effects of sexism in counseling can be flawed if research is based on the assumption that all members of one sex behave equivalently. Differences within each sex grouping are greater than differences between men and women (Mischel, 1966). Some of the characteristics which might affect counselor responses to women include: type of problem, age of client, and sex of counselor.

The first variable, problem, type, may greatly affect how the counselor responds to a client. Melnick (1975) found that counselors were rated as having higher empathy, respect, genuineness, affective responses, and exploratory responses for social-personal problems than for vocational-educational problems. Thomas and Stewart

(1971) studied responses to high school girls who presented vocational choice problems. They found that counselors who were told that the girl preferred a traditional feminine career rated her career choice as more appropriate and recommended further counseling less often than did counselors who were told that the girl had a more "deviant" career goal of engineering. Since different types of vocational concerns elicit differential counselor treatment, different types of personal-emotional problems might also elicit different responses from counselors. For example, counselors may react differently to problems with sexual content than to problems without sexual content. Therefore, the first purpose of the study was to examine counselor responses to four different problems: A traditional vocational problem (social work), a non-traditional vocational problem (engineering) a sexual personal problem (feared rape), and a non-sexual personal problem (existential anxiety).

The second variable, age of client, has received minimal attention in the counseling literature. Persons of different ages have different characteristics and crisis points (Erickson, 1963). For example, in college population, a woman in her mid-thirties who returns to school after devoting several years to raising children has different types of adjustment, vocational, and social problems than an 18 year-old college student. The second purpose of the present study was to examine differences in counselors' responses

to and expectations for clients of two age levels: 20 versus 35 years old.

A third area of interest was the effects of the sex of the counselor in responding to women's problems. Hill (1975) found significant differences among female and male counselors in their interviewing behaviors with clients so this variable was also examined.

This study investigated, via videotaped vignettes of female clients, three variables: client problem, age of client, and counselor sex. Five dependent measures were used to evaluate counselor responses to these variables: empathy ratings, counselor estimates of problem severity, counselor ratings of ability to profit from counseling, attractiveness, and number of sessions needed.

METHOD

Construction of Videotaped Stimulus Materials

Four vignettes were developed by the authors (scripts are available upon request from the first author) which represented typical client problems encountered at a university counseling center. Two vignettes related to personal-emotional concerns: a sexually-related topic (feared rape) and a non-sexually-related topic (existential anxiety). The other two vignettes were of vocational-educational concerns: decision for a traditional college major (social work), and decision for a non-traditional college major (engineering). All four vignettes consisted of five client

statements, each of equivalent length.

Two 20 year-old and two 35 year-old white female students practiced the scripts until they were able to portray the parts with similar affect and style. Each client was videotaped in one personal-emotional problem and one vocational-educational problem, yielding a total of eight vignettes. These eight vignettes were divided into two equivalent forms (A & B) of four vignettes each. Within each four-vignette form, all four problem types were represented, two played by younger women and two played by older women.

To verify that the final versions of the two forms were equivalent, three doctoral psychology students (two male, one female), naive to the purpose of the study, viewed and judged each of the videotaped vignettes for emotional expressiveness, clarity of content, technical quality, overall content, and physical attractiveness of the client-actresses. After the first filming, two of the eight vignettes were judged as dissimilar to the others on several of the ratings. Further recasting and refilming were done until all vignettes were judged as equivalent. The judges estimated the ages of both of the younger clients as 19 years and the older clients as 32 and 33 years old.

Subjects

Eighty-eight graduate students in counseling-related fields, staff members of a university counseling center, and faculty in counselor education and counseling and clinical psychology

participated in this study. All subjects were associated with a large Eastern university. The sample consisted of 24 females and 12 males at the master's level, 8 female and 8 male doctoral students, and 12 female and 24 male postdoctoral subjects.

Measures

The empathy measure utilized was Carkhuff's (1969) five point rating scale of empathy. Eacho of the subjects' written responses were rated via this scale.

The reaction form consisted of five questions. The first three used a five-point Likert-type scale: 1) How serious do you think this person's problems are? (5 = very serious); 2) How much would the client profit from counseling? (5 = very much); 3) How much would you like to work with this person? (5 = very much). The subjects were also asked to estimate the number of sessions the client would need on a 1-7 scale where 1 = none, 2 = 1-2, 3 = 3-5, 4 = 6-10, 5 = 11-20, 6 = 21-50, and 7 = over 50 sessions. At the end of the form, counselors were asked to write their best short-term advice for the client.

Procedure

Subjects were yoked according to sex (male, female) and experience level (masters, doctoral, postdoctoral), such that half of the sample was randomly selected to watch Form A and half of the sample was randomly selected to watch Form B.

Subjects, tested in small groups, were instructed to view each

vignette and respond (in writing) as if the client were being seen in an intake interview. After each of the five statements spoken by the four clients, the tape was stopped and the subjects wrote their most helpful response to the client, yielding a total of 20 responses per subject. Subjects were instructed to make some written response, even though in an actual counseling situation they may not have responded verbally to the client at any of the particular points. At the completion of each vignette, subjects completed the reaction form.

Two naive undergraduates (one female and one male) were trained to rate each of the subject's written responses to the clients on the empathy scale. Training consisted of practice in rating counselor responses (obtained from another study) and discussing the ratings. Training was considered complete when an inter-rater reliability of .70 was obtained on two consecutive sets of 15 ratings. Both raters then evaluated all of the randomly arranged counselor responses, with a resulting inter-rater reliability of .88. An average rating for each subject on each problem type was obtained by computing a mean of the ratings of both raters on the five counselor responses.

All subjects were asked about the purpose of the study. No subjects recognized that the experimenters were attempting to assess the impact of the age of client, although some did indicate that they thought counselor sex and problem type were being investigated.

RESULTS

Means and standard deviations for the five dependent variables on the four problem types are shown in Table 1. Separate analyses were used for (1) problem type and (2) counselor sex by client age, on each problem type.

Insert Table 1 about here

Problem Type

To determine if there were differences between problem types regardless of counselor sex or client age, five one-way, repeated measures ANOVAs were computed on each of the dependent variables for the four problems. Significant differences between problem types resulted on all of the dependent variables: seriousness ($F = 124.84$, $p < .001$), profit ($F = 7.87$, $p < .001$), attractiveness ($F = 8.65$, $p < .001$), sessions ($F = 117.92$, $p < .001$) and empathy ($F = 5.92$, $p < .001$). Post hoc analyses, using Duncan Multiple Range tests at a .05 significance level, were used to determine where the differences lay. For seriousness, the order of the means was: feared rape, existential anxiety, and equivalent ratings for social work and engineering. For profit, the order of the means was: existential anxiety, followed by equivalent ratings for feared rape, social work and engineering. For attractiveness, existential anxiety and feared rape were equivalent and higher than social work and

and engineering. On empathy, existential anxiety was higher than the two vocational problems and feared rape was higher than social work.

Each of the four problem types was further analyzed for the affects of counselor sex and client age.

Feared Rape

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the five dependent measures on feared rape. Five 2 X 2 (counselor sex X client age) ANOVAs were computed on the dependent variables. There was a main effect of counselor sex on the profit variable ($F = 10.33$, $p < .001$), such that female counselors viewed treatment as more profitable than did male counselors. Client age resulted in a main effect on sessions ($F = 4.49$, $p < .05$). with the 35 year old client being perceived as needing more sessions that the 20 year old. Counselor sex resulted in a main effect on empathy ($F = 4.32$, $p < .05$), such that female counselors were more empathic than male counselors. Also, there was a main effect for client age on empathy ($F = 5.26$, $p < .05$), with the younger client receiving more empathy than the older client. Counselor sex and client age resulted in an interaction effect on attractiveness ($F = 4.02$, $p < .05$), although post-hoc analyses (Duncan Multiple-Range tests with a significance level of .05) revealed no significant differences between groups.

Insert Table 2 about here

Existential Anxiety

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for the five dependent measures of the ratings for existential anxiety. Five 2 X 2 (counselor sex X client age) ANOVAs revealed two significant interactions between counselor sex and client age on seriousness ($F = 7.00$, $p < .01$) and on number of sessions ($F = 4.06$, $p < .05$). Post-hoc analyses (Duncan Multiple-Range tests with a significance level of .05) revealed that for seriousness, female counselors rated the younger woman's problem as more serious than the older woman's problem. Post-hoc analyses revealed no significant differences for the number of sessions, although the trend was in the same direction as for seriousness.

Insert Table 3 about here

Social Work

Means and standard deviations for the five dependent measures for social work are presented in Table 4. The five 2 X 2 (counselor sex X client age) ANOVAs revealed significant interactions for seriousness ($F = 4.67$, $p < .05$) and number of sessions ($F = 3.72$, $p < .05$). Post-hoc analyses (Duncan Multiple-Range tests with a significance level of .05) indicated that for seriousness, the female counselors rated the older woman's problem as more serious than the younger woman's problem. No post-hoc comparisons for

number of sessions reached significance, although the trend was in the same direction as for seriousness.

Insert Table 4 about here

Engineering

Means and standard deviations for the five dependent variables for engineering are presented in Table 5. The five 2 X 2 (counselor sex X client age) ANOVAs revealed a main effect for counselor sex on profit ($F = 4.65$, $p < .05$), such that female counselors viewed treatment as more profitable than did male counselors. There was also a main effect for client age on empathy ($F = 9.43$, $p < .05$), such that the 35 year old was given more empathy than the 20 year old.

Insert Table 5 about here

DISCUSSION

The two women who were concerned with personal-social problems were considered as having more serious problems, being able to profit more from counseling, being more desirable to work with, needing more sessions of counseling, and they also received more empathy than the two women with educational-vocational concerns. These findings supported Melnick's (1975) results of a higher responsiveness

of counselors for personal-emotional concerns rather than vocational concerns. Within the personal-social concerns, feared rape was perceived as more serious and requiring more sessions while existential anxiety was perceived as having more potential for profit from counseling. Counselors may have thought that existential anxiety was a more appropriate problem for counseling than fear of rape. Although counselors indicated that fear of rape was a serious problem, on the short-term advice several suggested that extra-counseling approaches, such as self-defense courses or safety measures (e.g., requesting additional police patrols), might be more appropriate interventions.

The two eductational-vocational problems were rated equivalently on all of the dependent measures, suggesting that the counselors perceived no differences between the dilemnas faced by the woman considering the traditional or the non-traditional college majors. This is in contrast with Thomas and Stewart (1971), who found that counselors rated non-traditional choices of high school women as more deviant than traditional choices. It could be that counselor's perceptions have changed over the last few years or the different age group of subjects caused the discrepant results. Alternatively, the differences may be accounted for by the change in employment opportunities in these two fields over the past few years. Engineering is now encouraging women to apply whereas social work is not; this reversal in employment practices may be influencing the counselors to view the two fields more similarly. An alternate explanation

however, is that counselors are currently quite sensitized to appearing "sexist" and may have guarded against expressing any biased comments.

The results for age of client and sex of counselor are inconsistent across problem types, indicating that there are no clear-cut effects. This data supports the past research which has found complex and conflicting results in examining the counselor-client gender pairing (Hill, 1975; Tanney & Birk, in press). Although the complexity of the results makes interpretations very difficult and tenuous, there are some interesting findings which may provide useful avenues for future research in discovering some of the variables which determine how counselors respond to various woman clients.

Feared Rape

Concern about rape was perceived as the most serious problem. The women were rated as being able to profit considerably from counseling, being desirable to work with, and in need of about 16 sessions. Counselors expressed a moderate level of empathy to these clients. Both client age and counselor sex affected the perceptions of these clients. Female counselors were more empathic and predicted more profit than did male counselors for clients who feared rape. Also, the older woman was perceived by all counselors as needing more sessions of counseling but more empathy was expressed to the younger woman.

Since fear of rape is generally a female concern, female counselors may have been more understanding and optimistic because they could personally identify with the fear and anxiety of being raped and assaulted, along with the feelings of helplessness. Perhaps because the female counselors had themselves dealt with these fears, they personally felt that counseling could be beneficial.

Existential Anxiety

The two persons who portrayed existential anxiety were seen as having moderately serious problems requiring about 19 sessions and being desirable clients. Further, the counselors responded to these persons with more empathy and felt that they had more probability of profiting from counseling than did any of the other clients. Perhaps the counselors, all of whom worked on a college campus, were so empathic and optimistic because concern over identity and purpose of life is a problem commonly experienced by students during the college years.

The female counselors perceived the younger woman's problem as more serious than the older woman's problem, whereas the ratings of seriousness by the male counselors fell in the intermediate range. Perhpas female counselors perceived this problem as a normal role conflict for the older woman, who has to make some decisions about a career since any children would be beyond preschool age. The younger woman, on the other hand, would have a more difficult choice between differing goals in life.

Social Work

These women were not perceived as having very serious problems but the counselors did feel that they could profit from about four sessions of counseling. They were moderately attracted to working with these women in counseling. In comparison to the other problems, a decision about entering social work was considered the least serious problem and elicited the least empathy from the counselors. Female counselors perceived the older woman as having a more serious problem than the younger woman, which is a reverse of the results for the existential anxiety. Perhaps these problems are viewed by female counselors as age-related.

Engineering

Similar to those considering social work, these women were not seen as having very serious problems but were rated as able to profit from about four sessions of counseling. Additionally, female counselors were more likely to think that these women would profit from counseling, perhaps because of their greater urge to support women in a non-traditional role. Also, the older woman was given more empathy than the younger woman, perhaps because counselors felt they would need more support, since they were both older and in a non-traditional college major.

CONCLUSIONS

These results provide preliminary evidence that counselors' reactions to female clients vary according to problem type, counselor

sex, and client age. Further research is needed to extend and clarify these effect in naturalistic counseling settings. Additional refinements of the measurement and populations can also aid in indentifying more specifically the source of variance in responses to female clients. However, these results strongly suggest that women should not be used as a general single category in research. Rather, those characteristics of women which evoke responses in counseling should be examined individually.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for the Entire Sample (N=88) on the Dependent Variables by Problem Type

	Feared Rape		Existential Anxiety		Social Work		Engineering	
	X	S.D.	X	S.D.	X	S.D.	X	S.D.
Serious	3.96	.95	3.28	.79	1.98	.71	2.17	.98
Profit	3.98	.97	4.31	.73	3.93	1.02	3.75	1.11
Attractive	3.86	1.07	3.92	1.00	3.36	1.25	3.31	1.33
Sessions	4.94	1.08	4.56	.80	3.23	.67	3.23	.81
Empathy	2.03	.41	2.10	.36	1.91	.35	2.00	.42

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for the Dependent Variables on Feared Rape for Client Age by Counselor Sex

	Feared Rape									
	Serious		Profit		Attractive		Sessions		Empathy	
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
Female Counselors (N=44)	4.14	.79	4.30	.82	3.91	1.18	5.09	.96	2.12	.45
35 years (N=22)	4.23	.92	4.18	.91	3.77	1.23	5.32	.89	2.07	.46
20 years (N=22)	4.04	.65	4.41	.73	4.04	1.13	4.86	1.04	2.16	.44
Male Counselors (N=44)	3.77	1.06	3.66	1.02	3.82	.89	4.80	1.13	1.94	.33
35 years (N=22)	3.73	1.16	3.63	1.00	4.14	.64	5.04	1.25	1.80	.28
20 years (N=22)	3.82	.96	3.64	1.05	3.50	1.14	4.54	1.01	2.09	.38

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for the Dependent Variables on Existential Anxiety for Client Age by Counselor Sex

	Existential Anxiety									
	Serious		Profit		Attractive		Sessions		Empath	
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S
ale Counselors (N=44)	3.30	.83	4.38	.69	4.04	1.07	4.52	.80	2.11	
35 years (N=22)	3.00	.87	4.18	.80	4.04	1.13	4.32	.72	2.08	
20 years (N=22)	3.59	.80	4.59	.59	4.04	1.00	4.73	.88	2.15	
e Counselors (N=44)	3.27	.69	4.23	.75	3.80	.93	4.59	.78	2.09	
35 years (N=22)	3.41	.67	4.27	.70	3.91	.87	4.73	.83	2.18	
20 years (N=22)	3.14	.71	4.18	.80	3.68	1.00	4.46	.67	2.00	

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for the Dependent Variables on Social Work for Client Age by Counselor Sex

	Social Work									
	Serious		Profit		Attractive		Sessions		Empathy	
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S
ale Counselors (N=44)	1.93	.71	4.09	1.10	3.50	1.38	3.30	.64	1.93	
35 years (N=22)	2.28	.77	4.18	1.05	3.64	1.36	3.50	.67	1.96	
20 years (N=22)	1.63	.65	4.00	1.16	3.36	1.40	3.09	.61	1.90	
e Counselors (N=44)	1.98	.67	3.77	.90	3.23	1.11	3.16	.68	1.90	
35 years (N=22)	1.96	.65	3.96	.95	3.41	1.22	3.09	.61	1.86	
20 years (N=22)	2.00	.69	3.59	.85	3.04	1.00	3.23	.75	1.94	

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations for the Dependent Variables on Engineering for Client Age by Counselor Sex

	Engineering								
	Serious		Profit		Attractive		Sessions		Empa
	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	$\bar{X}$
Female Counselors (N=44)	2.07	1.37	4.00	1.10	3.41	1.52	3.16	.87	2.03
35 years (N=22)	1.91	.75	3.73	1.32	3.23	1.54	3.09	.92	2.16
20 years (N=22)	2.23	1.23	4.27	.88	3.59	1.50	3.23	.81	1.89
Male Counselors (N=44)	2.27	.94	3.54	1.05	3.20	1.13	3.23	.73	1.98
35 years (N=22)	2.41	.85	3.41	.96	3.04	1.13	3.50	.86	2.11
20 years (N=22)	2.14	1.04	3.59	1.14	3.36	1.14	3.09	.61	1.84